

[Graves on Kroeger, 'The Suffragents: How Women Used Men to Get the Vote'](#)

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The following book review from H-SHGAPE may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Brooke Kroeger

Reviewer:

Kristina Graves

Brooke Kroeger. *The Suffragents: How Women Used Men to Get the Vote*. Albany: Excelsior Editions, 2017. 390 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-6629-3; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-6630-9.

Reviewed by Kristina Graves (Clayton State University, Stilwell School of the Arts) **Published on** H-SHGAPE (February, 2019) **Commissioned by** William S. Cossen (The Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science, and Technology)

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In *Suffragents: How Women Used Men to Get the Vote*, Brooke Kroeger examines the critical role that men played in the women's suffrage movement through the creation and mobilization of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage. In her work, Kroeger argues that the leaders of the women's suffrage movement "used" men to gain voting rights during the 1917 state suffrage campaign in New York. From 1908 to 1920, the New York Men's League hosted fundraisers, participated in marches, gave public speeches, and lobbied government officials for the cause. According to Kroeger, the Men's League was a "momentous, yet subtly managed development in the suffrage movement's seventh decade" (p. 1). While *Suffragents* focuses exclusively on the New York branch of the Men's League, Kroeger acknowledges that the organization was much larger in scope and created a national network of prominent men who advocated for suffrage through their public presence, such as socialist Max Eastman, muckraker Upton Sinclair, historian Charles Beard, and financier James Lees Laidlaw. However, Kroeger asserts that one of the unique aspects of the Men's League was that the men were subordinate to the women and their agenda was largely guided by women leaders of the movement.

Suffragents is one of the first works to fully examine male involvement in the American suffrage movement, an area of historical study that has long been ignored by suffrage historians. Historical writings that have explored the role of men in the suffrage movement typically focus on the British movement. When historians do examine men's roles in the suffrage movement, many of the attitudes aimed toward the men are dismissive. In recent years, historians like Lisa Tetrault (*The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898* [2014])

) and Laura E. Free (*Suffrage Reconstructed: Gender, Race, and Voting Rights in the Civil War Era* [2015]) have begun to recognize the contributions of men within their own analysis of the suffrage movement. Likewise, Kroeger's work sheds light on an important aspect of the women's suffrage movement: the reality that women had to work with men to successfully win the fight for voting rights. *Suffragents* is well written, a testament to Kroeger's skills as a journalist and her ability to weave a compelling story that also flows chronologically. Her descriptions of the parades and people's negative responses to the presence of the Men's League illustrate the daily humiliations that they suffered for their advocacy and commitment to the cause. Kroeger's work pulls from a wide array of archival material, suffrage historiographies, and memoirs of the members of the Men's League to create a comprehensive analysis of the New York chapter of the organization.

While Kroeger makes an excellent case that the Men's League played an important role in the movement, there are some significant challenges to her work. For one, Kroeger believes that the Men's League played an important role but was not an equal contributor with women. Kroeger refers to male activism as a "novelty" or "phenomenon" of the time period, suggesting that male suffragists remained on the periphery of society and were mostly confined to the radicalism of New York City politics (p. 242). This argument is supplemented by her continuous assertion that male suffragists were only active or present when female reformers deemed their presence necessary to achieve the goals of the movement. In reality, the Men's League took on a life of its own and maintained a significant presence nationwide and within state chapters. Much of the activism of the Men's League actually occurred outside of the New York chapter and independent of the female leaders. To suggest that men were "used" by women reformers reinforces the negative imagery associated with suffragists as shrewish, demanding women and the male suffragists as submissive, feminized men. This approach can be problematic because it frames the men who supported suffrage as outliers and ignores the reality that in the early twentieth century, women were significantly dependent on changing the minds of men to gain voting rights.

The most problematic aspect of Kroeger's narrative is that it does not place the activism of the Men's League within the broader historical context of male activism of the Progressive Era. Kroeger ignores the reality that social reformers, male and female, collaborated with greater frequency at the turn of the century—a trend that occurred due to changing gender roles. Historians recognize that there are several reasons for this change in societal expectations of men and women. One, as women's involvement in public reforms and partisan politics increased, a process that actually began prior to the Civil War, men quickly learned that women could be powerful partners in social movements, such as temperance, education, asylum reform, racial equality, and women's suffrage. The visible presence of the socially liberated "New Woman" and her participation in social movements enabled within the "New Man" a willingness to share the mutual responsibility with women for reforming society. Two, female suffragists have long recognized that male support was a critical component to gaining a federal amendment. They understood that, in a time period when women were unable to politically emancipate themselves through the process of voting, it made sense to align with powerful and public male allies. In contrast to Kroeger's argument that women "used" men rather than viewed them as equal partners, it could be suggested that what truly made the Men's League significant was that it was the first male organization that advocated for women's suffrage on its own merit. Nonetheless, Kroeger's work is important because it sheds light on a part of suffrage history that requires more exploration. One hopes that future historians will continue to examine the roles that men played in

women's movements of the past and that their example can create within men and women strong allies for future reforms and movements.

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